

HEFT 37

A Historian of the Tlingit

by David E. Conrad



NORTORF 1984

AUG 21 1986

18588A

So
Völkerkundliche
Arbeitsgemeinschaft

POLAR
PAM
1343

POLARPAM

Information about the Author

David E. Conrad is professor of history at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. He is author of The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of Sharecroppers in the New Deal which won the Agricultural History Award in 1965, and co-author of Lyndon B. Johnson: The Formative Years.

His article "Creating the Nation's Largest Forest Reserve: Roosevelt, Emmons, and the Tongass National Forest" (Pacific Historical Review, Feb. 1977) won the Blegan Award for 1977.

1984

Copyright by the VÖLKERKUNDLICHE ARBEITSGEMEINSCHAFT, c/o Uwe Johannsen, Postfach 1142, 2353 Nortorf, West Germany.

ISSN 0507-2204

Few of the many who have studied and written about the Tlingit Indians have been able to see them from all angles. The specializations of the historian, ethnologist, archeologist, and museum collector are separated by broad differences of approach and philosophy, and often one discipline fails to benefit from the work of the others.

All the specializations have their short-comings. The archaeologist and the museum collector are bound by obvious limitations on what can be known about a culture from its material objects. The archeologist, in dealing with the junk of the past, the pots, utensils, weapons, and dwellings which have for whatever reason been lost or abandoned, gets a mundane view of a culture. The museum collector, always on the lookout for the unusual, beautiful, or meaningful, sees the proudest achievements of the society, but these may not be typical. The ethnologist gets most of his information from people, but he is at the mercy of their memories and their natural desire to make themselves look good. Even so, the ethnologist can direct his inquiry more specifically than the historian, who has only what chance allowed to survive as sources. Ideally, the four disciplines should come together to make a complete picture, but they seldom do, the limitations of the human mind and the pressures to specialize being what they are.

The Tlingits are a fascinating people with a rich culture and history. Unfortunately, what we see in the museums is a poor reflection of Tlingit life. The static displays, no matter how well done, can never do more than suggest the drama and excitement of Tlingit culture. In a similar way, archeology will never reveal the shadowy past of the Tlingit in the period before historical and ethnological techniques can be used. The archeologists tell us, however, that the Tlingits are young as a people, that they came either from the Athapascans, Eskimos, or Aleuts; that their culture began taking shape about a thousand years ago, and that they acted as middlemen in the cultural and trade exchange which took place between the Northwest Coast tribes and the Eskimos. After contact with Europeans, the Tlingit underwent great cultural changes, but they did it mostly on their own terms. Whatever they have evolved into the 20th century, they have remained Tlingit (Footnote 1).

The Tlingits have proven an even more difficult subject for historians than for archeologists and ethnologists. No one has been able to achieve a comprehensive understanding of their past culture. Part of the trouble lies within the Tlingits themselves. Their society is so different and complicated that it cannot be understood easily by outsiders. Also, the Tlingits have extraordinary concepts of history, truth, and time.

Most Tlingit "history" is family and clan history. The stories of the past are passed from father to son and are family property. Only family members are allowed to tell them or to enact them in potlatch ceremonies or in songs and oratory. Moreover, two accounts of the same event may differ greatly from one clan to another. The differences are so great and the oral tradition is so dominated by the need to glorify the clan and its ancestors that Tlingit oral history can seldom be accepted as historical truth. When the Tlingit's proclivity for wild supernaturalism is added, the stories become wholly incredible to outsiders (Footnote 2).

Other Indians are better historians than the Tlingits. Often, other Indians know more about their own tribal history, and what they know contains more fact and less supernaturalism. The hero figures of other Indian histories are usually great warriors, chiefs, or shamans, rather than the ancestors of the family as Tlingit historic figures invariably are. Other Indians' knowledge of geography is often more exact than the Tlingits, who in the past thought mostly in terms of travel routes, and the location of reefs and shoals, fishing streams and berry patches. In fact, because of their sea-borne life style, the Tlingits had very little concept of territoriality and were little concerned with geography.

The Tlingits had a different concept of truth and reality. For them, the stories of their oral tradition were like holy scriptures. They believed all of them, not just parts. They no more questioned the incredible stories of god-like acts by Raven or Wolf than did they question the probably true stories of how their ancestors came to live in a certain place.

The same kind of indistinction exists in Tlingit concepts of time. It is quite common for Tlingits not to be able to tell whether a certain past event happened before or after the coming of the Russians. For them, an event happened a long time ago, in "grandfather time". Decades and even centuries blur into the past when the world was mysteriously different and only partly formed (Footnote 3).

All of these special qualities of the Tlingits make them a difficult subject for researchers and writers and combined with the crossover problems of the four disciplines mentioned earlier, the task of understanding them is well nigh insurmountable. Even so, the difficulties have not stopped some from trying.

One who tried to understand the Tlingits from the viewpoints of historian, ethnologist, and museum collector was George T. Emmons. During many years in Alaska, he came to know the Tlingit as few men ever did. He spoke their language well and was made a member of the tribe and was even given a family name. For more than forty years he collected Tlingit artifacts for the great American museums, and before he was through he wrote dozens of ethnological studies on the Tlingits. In the late years of his long life, Emmons attempted to write a comprehensive history of the Tlingits, the success of which will be discussed later.

Emmons first visited the Tlingit in 1882. For the next seventeen years he was executive officer aboard the U.S.S. Adams and later the Pinta, United States Navy gunboats which cruised Alaskan waters in the 1880s and 1890s showing the flag and providing the only vestige of official American influence. One of the main functions of the gunboats was to maintain peace between the native Indian population and the thousands of gold seekers who invaded the area in these years. Emmons' particular assignment was to deal with the Indians. While his captain remained aboard the gunboat, he went ashore to the villages to represent the U. S. government. Sometimes he was accompanied by marine guards but usually not. If need be, he arrested Indian wrong-doers or destroyed illegal liquor stills, but he was always diplomatic and often took the unpopular actions with the consent of the chief (Footnote 4). He soon became respected and apparently liked by the Indians.

It is not clear when Emmons first became interested in Tlingit culture. He probably took notes on the Tlingits and collected their art and artifacts from the very first. His father, George F. Emmons, was executive officer of the Navy's Wilkes

Expedition when it visited the Northwest Coast in 1841. Later the senior Emmons led naval expeditions in California during the Mexican War and in 1866-68 commanded the Ossipee when it brought the first U. S. commissioners and the American flag to Alaska after purchase from Russia. The father collected many native artifacts on his travels in the Pacific, and decades later, Emmons still had some of these pieces in his personal collection. If the truth be known, Emmons spent his entire life in an attempt to emulate his famous father, who became an admiral, a hero in two wars, an author of a history of U. S. naval vessels, and at one time naval attaché to the White House in the Grant Administration (Footnote 5).

Emmons retired from the navy in 1899 because of ill health. He then turned full-time to a career he had begun years earlier, that of collecting Northwest Coast Indian art and artifacts for the big American natural museums. Today, all of them have a highly prized collection of Emmons' materials, often consisting of thousands of items. In his collecting, Emmons earned a reputation for great care and accuracy. His field notes and the information he provided the museums contain great detail on where and when the items were found, the purpose, and what religious or artistic meaning they had (Footnote 6). Franz Boas, considered by most as the founder of American anthropology, cites Emmons often in his classic book on primitive art as an expert on the interpretation of Tlingit and Northwest Coast Indian art (Footnote 7).

As an outgrowth of his collecting, Emmons began writing ethnological studies concerning the things he had collected. His articles on the Chilkat blanket and Tlingit basketry are considered by most experts to be the most important contributions to the understanding of these subjects. Quite naturally, Emmons' ethnological writing led to an interest in history. The legends of how the Chilkat blanket or the Tlingit basket began were part of the family histories, and in talking with the Indians about these, Emmons built up a considerable knowledge of the history of the people (Footnote 8).

In the "Chilkat Blanket" for example, Emmons went beyond the mechanics of blanket making to explain the entire picture of trade and cultural exchange along the Northwest coast. Not only was there a lively trade in copper, to be discussed later, but there was trading in sea-going canoes up and down the coast, and an exchange of the seal products and oolachon grease of the coast for the moose and caribou skins of the inland. Trade led to inter-tribal marriage and petty wars, all of which contributed to mutual exchange of ideas and art (Footnote 9).

In all of his gathering of information from the Indians, Emmons probably never realized he was also collecting oral history. In fact, Emmons had the old fashioned idea that history could be written only in the white man's terms. Writing once about Chicagof Island, he said, "Although native tradition deals largely with this area, yet authentic history is wanting." (Footnote 10). He did not seem to know that what he was recording was more authentic than the accounts of the brief visits of explorers and sea captains which make up the standard early history of the area. In fact, because he knew the Tlingits for so many years, spoke their language, and understood their culture so well, Emmons' ethnological writings turned out to be invaluable historical sources.

In 1908, for instance, when Emmons wrote an article on the petroglyphs of the Tlingit, he gave us a rare, even one-time insight into the ancient history of the Tlingit. The petroglyphs were images pecked into the face of rock walls near old villages. Emmons described them as "the most permanent but least intelligible of all their earlier works ..." He often asked natives during the 1880s about the meaning of these curious drawings, but no one was able to tell him much about the origins or the reasons for them.

In 1888, while game hunting in one of the deep bays along the western shore of Baranof Island, Emmons met an old Tlingit who knew the location of a mysterious petroglyph which many other Tlingits knew existed but had never seen. Emmons plied the old Tlingit with gifts and persuaded him to show him the glyph. The two men travelled to the mouth of a small stream on the coast and found there the ruins of an Indian village which Emmons judged to have been abandoned more than a hundred years earlier. Nearby was a pyramid-shaped boulder about four feet high and covered by a decaying tree trunk and many branches. The two men could uncover only one of the three faces of the rock, but on it they found a single picture with five principle figures, all badly worn by time. After Emmons got some black mud from the nearby beach and worked it into the grooves, he could make out the figures clearly. He asked the old Tlingit what they meant and received the answer that it was "the oldest story of mankind -- the creation". Emmons made a sketch of what he had seen and after the Indian reverently recovered the face of the rock with branches, the two men left. It is unlikely that anyone since has seen this petroglyph because Emmons could never find it again and the old Tlingit died soon thereafter (Footnote 11).

Another example of hidden historical information can be found in Emmons' "Portraiture Among North Pacific Coast Tribes". In this ethnological monograph, Emmons described the effects of white contact on the art and lives of the Tlingit, and he took the opportunity to air the most recurring theme in all of his writing. Emmons explained that before contact, when the Indians lived in what he called a "primitive" state, and when their only tools were stone and shell, their art showed great originality of design and attention to detail. After contact, when the Indian artists acquired metal tools, their latent talents developed. Portraiture, for instance, had been beyond the ability of the Indians until they got metal carving tools, but once they had these, the artists were able to make the life-like statutes of dead relatives which Emmons had seen all along the Northwest Coast.

For a few years around the middle of the 19th Century, when Indians had the new tools and still had their old talents, the art of the Northwest Coast flourished. Emmons rather ineptly called it the Victorian Age of their development. Then came the "contaminating influences" of civilization. The Indians prospered economically, but when they got cheaper commercial products they neglected the home-made ones. Then came the missionaries, who discouraged potlatches and shamanism and abolished ceremonial paraphernalia. The result was a sharp decline in native art. At the same time, many Tlingits began working in the salmon industry, which taught them modern methods and the concept of keeping a work schedule. Nearly all had a living wage, but with these "blessings" of civilization came the curses of liquor and disease which killed many of them and ruined the lives of many more (Footnote 12). So while Emmons was ostensibly recording ethnological facts about Tlingit portrait-statues, he also described what he had seen happening to Indian life over a period of two decades.

As with the article on portraiture, Emmons usually wrote about some type of Indian art object, but in a piece with a title which seemed to be like all the others, "Copper Neck-Rings of Southern Alaska", he took an approach which was almost strictly historical. Copper was the only precious metal in use on the Northwest coast before the coming of the white man. The Chilkat clan of the Tlingit, who controlled the trade in copper, lived along the Lynn Canal and around Glacier Bay which gave them the geographical position to dominate the routes to and from the sources of copper in the Yukon and the Copper River Valley of Southern Alaska.

The Chilkat made themselves wealthy and powerful in the copper trade. Annually, they scheduled three or four trading expeditions through the Chilkoot Pass to the interior, where the Athapascans lived. These people were not aggressive and the dominant and savage Chilkats held them in virtual vassalage through the copper trade.

Even as late as 1890, the Chilkats did not allow an Athapascan to trade with outsiders or visit the coast unless escorted by a Tlingit.

The power of the Chilkats was well illustrated by an event which took place in 1852. The ever-present Hudson's Bay Company had long had its eye on the Indian trade of the Yukon. In 1852 they established Fort Selkirk in the heart of the trade area which the Chilkats considered their own. The Chilkats were furious; they formed an army and marched four hundred miles inland to capture and burn the fort. Maganimously, they let the Hudson's Bay factor escape with his life, but only after they had given him a message to take back to his company -- stay out of their area! It was one of the few times that the powerful company was bested by a rival for the Indian trade, and maybe the only time by an Indian rival.

The Chilkat traded also for copper with the Yakutat, another Tlingit clan who lived farther Northeast on the coast around Yakutat Bay. The Yakutat were in contact with other Athapascans who lived in the Copper River area. Other Tlingits, the Huna and Sitka, were also in the copper trade as well as non-Tlingits such as the Tshimshian and the Haida. But, according to Emmons, the Chilkat were the power brokers of the north because of the copper trade. All the coastal peoples used copper for implements and fashioned it into many types of ornaments. When the use of iron came to the coast, the Indians abandoned copper for making tools and when silver and gold were introduced, Indian artisans quickly adopted them for ornamental use.

It is surprising how much history of the Tlingits Emmons was able to put into a seemingly technical article on copper neck rings. In fact, the article was nearly all history and mythology, and Emmons left the details of how the neck rings were made and worn to another writer who provided it in a postscript (Footnote 13). Apparently, in 1900, when Emmons wrote the article on neck rings, the studies of ethnology and ethnohistory were so closely tied to museums and the collecting of artifacts and so dominated by people like Franz Boas, the anthropology curator of the American Museum of Natural History, that serious works on the history or ethnology of Indians were more likely to be published if they dealt also with museum-type objects like copper neck rings.

One of Emmons' best contributions to the history of the Tlingit is his account of the first meeting between these Indians and white men. There are many, perhaps thousands, of published accounts of the first contacts between Indians and European explorers, but few of them come from the Indians themselves, and even fewer are as engaging and amusing as Emmons' version of the Tlingit encounter with La Perouse. The meeting took place in a bay which fascinated Emmons and which he wrote about several times. Lituya Bay, a deep indentation on the mainland coast of Southeastern Alaska, northwest of Cross Sound, is indeed a unique place. Today, it is part of the Glacier Bay National Monument. The bay was once the bed of a glacier, and the sea now floods and ebbs through its narrow entrance over rocks and sand bars, making it one of the most dreaded harbors on the Pacific coast. At the head of the bay, several active glaciers break off great masses of ice which float around as icebergs. Outside the bay, the sea crashes on the shore, but inside all is calm. The water is glassy and the reflections of the icebergs, the distant Mount Fairweather Range and the aurora borealis give the place an eerie quality which has stimulated the imagination of nearly all who have visited it.

Even though the waters were so dangerous, Lituya Bay was a favorite hunting place of the Tlingits and other Indians. The Tlingits considered the bay sacred and had several legends about it. Like most Indians, they endowed all physical things with spirits. They believed that glaciers at the head of the bay were the spirit children of mountains and that the sun was the arch enemy of the icy mountains. To protect themselves from the sun, the mountains tore great rocks from their sides and scattered them all about. Even the waters of the spirit-filled bay told a story: the aurora borealis, mirrored on the surface of the water was seen as warrior spirits at play in heaven, and the reflected images of trees and rocks were the spirits of these objects come to rest on the calm waters.

The legend of Lituya included a monster, which dwelt in a cavern near the entrance to the bay. This spirit resented the approach of anyone to his domain and tried to destroy all who did. He transformed his victims into bears, who sat high in the mountains of the Fairweather Range and guarded the bay. At times, the monster and the bears would grasp the edge of the water and shake it like a sheet, causing great tidal waves which engulfed and drowned all who ventured into the bay.

Drowning was the death which Tlingits feared most. They faced other deaths with unflinching courage, but they believed that if they were to be warm and dry in the afterlife, they must be cremated. To drown in the sea would doom their spirits to be forever in the grip of an evil power. Such fears were an unfortunate psychosis for a nation of sea hunters to have, but the attitudes can be easily understood when one realizes that survival and even life itself for Tlingits was warmth and dryness.

Among those who felt the fury of nature at Lituya Bay was the party of French explorers led by La Perouse, who explored along the Northwest Coast all the way to the Bering Sea in 1786. Offshore near Lituya Bay, La Perouse noticed the opening of the bay and ordered his two ships to enter. With great difficulty, they passed through the dangerous mouth of the bay, and for twenty-six days, the French vessels lay at anchor in the wonderous bay, while La Perouse and the crews explored and traded with the natives. While surveying the mouth of the bay, two boats capsized in the great waves and their crews of twenty-one officers and men drowned.

More than a century later, Emmons heard a story from Cowee, a principal chief of the Tlingit, which he recognized as the Indian version of La Perouse's visit to Lituya Bay. When Emmons compared Cowee's story to the published account by La Perouse, he found a fascinating example of how an oral tradition had been passed on by five generations of Tlingits.

Cowee's story told of a large party of Thluke-nah-hut-tees, led by three chiefs who travelled north to Yakutat to trade for copper. They decided to hunt in Lituya Bay, but when they entered four canoes overturned and one chief and several other men drowned. The Tlingits made camp on shore and prepared to mourn their dead, and while the ceremonies were taking place, two ships came into the bay. The Indians had never seen anything like these strange vessels. To their minds, the ships were too large and strange-shaped to be watercraft and must be great black birds with outstretched white wings. The Indians concluded that the creator-spirit, Yehlh, who sometimes took the form of a raven, had come to them, and they fled to the forest in great fear.

After a while, when nothing harmful occurred, the Tlingits became curious and decided to see what the great birds were doing. They knew that to look at Yehlh with the naked eye would turn them and their children to stone, so they fashioned rude telescopes of rolled cabbage leaves and crept back to the shore to peer through their cabbage-scopes. When they saw the sailors climbing the rigging and running on deck, they thought the great birds were spreading their wings to fly and that flocks of black messengers were rising from their bodies and flying about.

This spectacle frightened the Tlingits again and once more they fled into the forest.

One family of warriors, more courageous than the others, launched their war canoe and paddled toward the ships. When one of the ships fired a cannon, the Indians saw the smoke rising from the great bird and heard the voice of thunder and they were so startled that they tumbled out of their canoe and had to swim and scramble ashore. Finally, one old warrior, who was nearly blind and whose life was nearly over, decided to face Yehlh and see if it would turn his children to stone. He set out alone in a canoe toward one of the ships.

When the old warrior came back to the other Tlingits, they were surprised to see him still alive. They crowded around him, touching and smelling him and asking many questions. He told a strange story. He had been on the great bird, and to his nearly blind eyes the black figures which moved around him still seemed to be crows. But the figures did him no harm; instead they offered him a bowl of rice which looked to him like worms and which he feared to eat. He exchanged his fur coat for a tin pan and gifts of food and with these he returned to shore.

After much thought, the old warrior decided that what he had seen so dimly was not Yehlh and that the black figures were really people. He convinced his clansmen not to be afraid and all of them then went to the ships where they traded their furs for many strange items. According to Cowee, about this time, the two boats of white men turned over near the mouth of the bay. It was the part of the story about the loss of two boats and many white lives that convinced Emmons that Cowee's story was indeed about the encounter with La Perouse. Amazingly, after one hundred years of telling and retelling by many people, the basic facts of the story were still correct. To Emmons, it seemed clear from this that Tlingit legends and folklore, however fanciful and filled with spirits and demons, could contain more basis in historical fact than most authorities ever dreamed (Footnote 14).

In his later years, Emmons became more and more interested in the history of the Tlingits. For many years he worked on what he called "A History of the Tlingit Clans" which the American Museum of Natural History in New York City agreed to publish if he ever finished it. He may have been encouraged in this effort by Franz Boas, but Emmons never completed the work. Despite his vast knowledge of the Tlingit, he could never seem to get his manuscript to resemble a completed work of history or anything else. He was trying to bridge the gap between all of the disciplines but the difficulty of that task has already been indicated. Emmons' manuscript may be published someday, and it should be because of the great wealth of information it contains, but it is hard to see how the work can stand on its own as a publishable work without extensive re-writing. Quite simply, Emmons' attempt at a history of the Tlingit clans failed.

One reason for the failure was the approach. Emmons did a smattering of research in published sources on the Tlingit, but most of what he wrote came from his own experience. In his subtitle, Emmons made it clear that the work was written "From Original Notes and Acquaintance With" the Tlingits. The problem here is that Emmons tried to write with scholarly detachment when he was his own principal source. He would have done better to have written the whole thing in first person and made it clear that he had gathered most of the information himself. The work falls short of being a complete history of the Tlingit because Emmons, although he probably knew them as well as any man of his time, had not experienced their entire history and was not able to reconstruct it completely by talking to them. No man could.

Emmons was too modest to realize that as his own best source he was without peer. A careful reading of his manuscript reveals what a valuable historical source it is. When Emmons first went among the Tlingit in 1882, they were living much as they always had in large communal houses, fishing and hunting in the sea for their subsistence, and practicing shamanism and ancestor worship. In the years that followed, Emmons witnessed great changes in the lives of the Tlingits. Outside trade goods gave them a new ease of life and new tastes. Many of them abandoned their villages to go to work in the canneries, sawmills, and mines of the white men. Their old communal life was destroyed and they became "transients between the past and the future". Emmons held great hopes that the Tlingits would make the transition successfully and adapt to the new way of life. He always thought they were "an intelligent, industrious, honest race", and he was confident they would develop into a "superior native population" (Footnote 15).

The method Emmons used in his history of the Tlingit clans was to treat each clan or kwan separately. There was usually an explanation of the kwan name and a description of the area occupied. Then there was an accounting of the various villages including a list of the families or kanes living in each. Sometimes, Emmons listed each house, and the families living there. He usually included a description of the living conditions of the people, their economy, and their history.

Although Emmons had no training as an historian, he endeavored to write the history of each clan based largely on what he personally knew about them. Here are some examples of how he was able to make historical judgements based on his own "acquaintance with". On of the families of the Yakutat, the An Klain, lived on the river of the same name. Emmons knew them from visits to the area in the 1880's. Near where the An Klain lived was a large, deserted village named Gou-hit-tan. This village was abandoned in the "early nineteenth century" because of a smallpox epidemic. The old village was later rebuilt and occupied by two families. The Ta-qwa-de and the Gou-hit-tan. The latter family had completely disappeared by the time Emmons wrote and the other family had moved to Yakutat.

How did Emmons deduce all of this? Most, if not all of his information came from talking to the Tlingits and visiting the sites where they lived or had lived. Smallpox would be easy to identify from descriptions and the Tlingits were sure to keep the names of families straight because families were so important to them. Fixing the dates was the difficult part; Emmons' estimate of "early nineteenth century" was probably little more than a guess. He believed he could judge the age of ruins by looking at them, but it is doubtful that he was scientifically accurate at this.

Another village, Seetuck, had an interesting history. Its name came from a group of Athapascans who crossed the coastal mountains (Emmons cannot say when) and settled on a stream by the same name. The village of Seetuck was the principal home of the Tlu-qway-de family, who built a stronghold nearby called Chak-nu (Eagle Fort). The fort was attacked and destroyed by the Tluke-nuh-ut-de, another family of the Yakutat, and when Emmons first visited it in 1886 the site was occupied by the Ta-qwai-de, who had taken over after the destruction of the fort. In later years, when Emmons visited the site, it was abandoned except as a summer fishing camp. Further inland on the Seetuck River was an abandoned village about which the natives told Emmons, but which could not even be found. Only the name was known -- Gunne-ash (Footnote 16).

Despite certain shortcomings, Emmons was able to put his considerable skills to good use in writing his history. By his knowledge of dialect and accent, he was able to distinguish between groups of Tlingits. For instance, he was the first to distinguish the Qwolth-yet as a separate kwan. These people lived to the west of the Yakutat and earlier writers had considered them a part of the Yakutat, but Emmons found that they were of slightly different origins. Their name meant "all families" and Emmons believed that their ancestry combined Eskimo, Athapaskan, and Tlingit elements. The

Qwolth-yet-kwan had been overlooked by ethnologists because they lived on an isolated, storm-swept coast seldom visited by anyone. In the natural struggle for domination which took place within the new village, the aggressive Tlingits prevailed and the Eskimos and Athapascans were either absorbed or returned to whence they came. Linguistically, the Qwolth-yet were different from other Tlingits, and Emmons could distinguish houses in their villages which traced their origins to Eskimos and Athapascans (Footnote 17).

Another way Emmons had to reconstruct Tlingit history was his knowledge of their art. Unlike most other Tlingits, the Ta-gway-de family of the Yakutat made totem poles and had an oval doorway in the chief's house. These characteristics, Emmons knew, were typical of the "Haida and extreme southern Tlingit". Emmons was almost as familiar with certain Tlingit works of art as the Tlingits themselves. In 1883 he visited the village of Tsuse-Ka and spent what must have been hours in the house of the chief studying and sketching four house posts. These posts supported the roof beams of the house and were beautifully carved and painted. They were in pairs, two featuring a brown bear and two an eagle. On all four the shark was the dominant theme because the shark was the chief's crest. Emmons even recorded the names of the carvers -- Koon-tisch and Sh-ke-ish.

Eighteen years later, when visiting the village of Yakutat, Emmons saw the same posts. The old village of Tsuse-ka had been abandoned and most of the houses had been dismantled and floated across the bay to the growing village of Yakutat so the Indians could be nearer the canneries and sawmills. Fortunately, the shark posts, which Emmons considered important works of art, were brought and placed in the reassembled houses (Footnote 18). These shark posts were also significant historical sources, but only someone with Emmons' knowledge and understanding could see it.

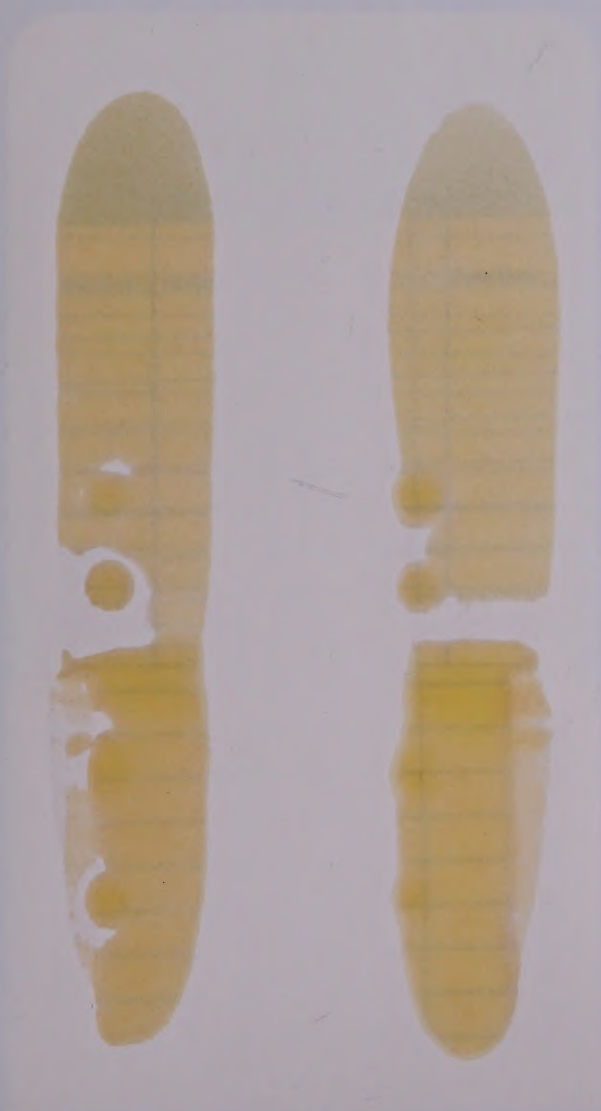
Unfortunately, it is not possible to detail here the entire Emmons manuscript on the Tlingit clans. What has been shown is Emmons' methods and some examples of his work. When Emmons' history of the Tlingit clans is finally published someday, those who are interested in Tlingit history can judge for themselves the value of his contribution. In the meantime, there can be little doubt, on the basis of already published ethnological works, that Emmons constitutes an important source on the history of the Tlingit, if only one knows how to look for it.

George Emmons lived ninety-three years. Except for the sixteen years when he was stationed in Alaska, he never stayed there the year-round. But for the first two decades of the twentieth century, he spent most of his summers in Alaska collecting native art and artifacts for the great museums. Winters he spent with his family at Princeton, New Jersey, cataloguing and selling his collections. He became well known as an Alaska expert, so much so that President Theodore Roosevelt chose him to go on a special mission to Alaska in 1902 to study the boundary dispute with Canada and in 1904 to report on the condition of Alaskan natives (Footnote 19). In 1903, he was instrumental in the creation of Alaska's huge Tongass National Forest (Footnote 20).

Emmons was himself an important figure in the early days of the Americanization of Alaska. He has been the subject of several writings and his importance is well known to Northwest Coast experts. However, Emmons' significance as a historian seems to have been neglected. Perhaps this article will stimulate new interest in that.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Frederica de Laguna, The Story of a Tlingit Community: A Problem in the Relationship Between Archeological, Ethnological, and Historical Methods, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 172 (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1960), pp. 1-8.
- 2 De Laguna, p. 18, and George T. Emmons, "The Whale House of the Chilkat", Anthropological Papers XIV (American Museum of Natural History, 1916), p. 9.
- 3 De Laguna, pp. 18-20.
- 4 Log of the USS Adams, Entries for Sept. 1882 and ff.; Log of the USS Pinta, 1886-1890, *passim*. National Archives, Record Group 24.
- 5 Edward W. Callahan (ed.), List of Officers of the Navy of the United States and of the Marine Corps from 1775 to 1900 (New York: Haskell House, 1969), p. 183; and William Stanton, The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 380.
- 6 Field Notes, Spuhn Collection, A-13 Archives, Field Museum of Natural History.
- 7 Franz Boas, Primitive Art (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), pp. 108-214, 253, 255, 257.
- 8 George T. Emmons, "The Chilkat Blanket," Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History III (December 1907), pp. 329-402; and G. T. Emmons, "The Basketry of the Tlingit", Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History III (July 1903), pp. 229-233.
- 9 Emmons, "The Chilkat Blanket", p. 331.
- 10 George T. Emmons, "History of the Tlingit Clans of Southeastern Alaska From Original Notes and Acquaintance With", an unpublished manuscript, American Museum of Natural History, New York. Hereafter cited as Emmons mss. "Hoona Kow", 2.
- 11 George T. Emmons, "Petroglyphs in Southeastern Alaska", American Anthropologist 10 (1908), pp. 221-30.
- 12 George T. Emmons, "Portraiture Among the North Pacific Coast Tribes", American Anthropologist 16 (1914), pp. 59-67.
- 13 George T. Emmons, "Copper Neck-Rings of Southern Alaska", American Anthropologist 10 (1908), pp. 644-49.
- 14 George T. Emmons, "Native Account of the Meeting Between La Perouse and the Tlingit," American Anthropologist 13 (1911), pp. 294-99.
- 15 Emmons mss., "Introduction".
- 16 Ibid., "Yakutat Kwan", 10.
- 17 Ibid., "Kwoth-Yet-Kwan".
- 18 Ibid., "Yakutat-Kwan", 9.
- 19 David E. Conrad, "Emmons of Alaska", Pacific Northwest Quarterly 69, no. 2 (April 1978), pp. 52-59.
- 20 David E. Conrad, "Creating the Nation's Largest Forest Reserve: Roosevelt, Emmons, and the Tongass National", Pacific Historical Review XLVI, no. 1 (February 1977), pp. 70-75.



DATE DUE

99999

Pam:39[Ind]:(*429)
CON

CONRAD, David E.
A historian of the Tlingit

Borrower's Name

Date Due

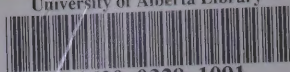
99999

Pam:39[Ind]:(*429)
CON

CONRAD, David E.
A historian of the Tlingit

Boreal Institute for Northern
Studies Library
CW 401 Bio Sci Bldg
The University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB Canada T6G 2E9

University of Alberta Library



0 1620 0329 1091